

Slow Burn

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Slow Burn by PTlikesTea

Category: IT (2017)

Genre: Descriptions of medical stuff, Gen, M/M, Richie/Eddie but just barely

Language: English

Characters: Eddie Kaspbrak, Richie Tozier, Sonia Kaspbrak

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-10-12

Updated: 2017-10-12

Packaged: 2020-01-26 12:55:32

Rating: Mature

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 2,345

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Just as things were getting back to normal, Richie barges in on Eddie's sickbed and makes a grim discovery.

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Author's note: This is my first fic for the IT fandom, I'm not sure how much I would write after this but I liked the movie and the dynamic between the characters so here I am. This could be considered Reddie, if you squint hard enough, but obviously there's nothing age inappropriate.

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As much as Richie liked to cultivate this obnoxious persona (and still had no real idea why he liked to cultivate obnoxiousness) he was actually quite aware of his friend's boundaries and just how far he could push them.

He knew turning up at Bill's house, or Stan's, unannounced and trying to hop in through their bedroom window would just mean having the window shut in his face and having to bike back home in the dark. Ben would probably let him in but his room was directly across from his Mom's and the walls at his place were paper-thin, he'd only get Ben in trouble. The road to Mike's was dark and bumpy and Mike could let him in or tell him to get fucked, depending on his mood.

So that really just left Eddie, who would bitch and moan about getting in trouble (he wouldn't, for all his Mom's clucking once he was actually in the house she more or less ignored him) but he would let him in anyway, and he was one of the few kids Richie knew who had an actual TV in their room.

It wasn't even that dark once he got to Eddie's house, tossed his bike into a nearby bush, shimmied up the drainpipe and knocked on Eddie's window. There was no response the first three times he knocked, so he kept up a steady stream of knocking for about five minutes until finally Eddie threw open the window and squinted at him groggily.

“Wha....Richie?” he grumbled.

Richie suddenly remembered Eddie had been off school for almost two weeks, and felt bad about bothering him... for all of three seconds. He still sounded really hoarse.

“Lemme in,” Richie demanded. “It's cold as fuck out here.”

He expected Eddie to argue, bitch about him letting the night air in or picking up that *of course you're cold you moron, you're only wearing one shirt*, or they'd do a whole back and forth where Eddie would tell him to get lost and Richie would dig in his heels and give a list of reasons why he had to be there (which would contain between six and fifteen *your mom* offhand comments)...

...but none of that happened. Instead Eddie just sort of flopped away from the window, and Richie followed, slightly confused.

Their dynamic hadn't changed that much, had it? Things were undoubtedly different since *the thing that happened that we don't talk about* and Bev's absence did leave a pretty big hole in the group, but

he had thought they were getting back to normal. Whatever normal was.

“What do you want?” Eddie mumbled from his bed, buried under a heap of blankets.

“You know that samurai movie we tried to sneak into last year?”

“No...”

“It's on TV tonight but my Dad wants to watch some lame thing about old ships....plus our TV's a piece of shit. So I came over to watch it here.”

Richie worried more than a little when Eddie didn't immediately tell him that was a really stupid reason for bothering him, but instead huffed a little 'ok' and closed his eyes.

“Thanks, Eddie-Spaghetti!” he said, jumping on the bed beside him with more careless bravado than he really felt. Eddie didn't even respond to the nickname.

The room had an odd smell. It had always smelled a little odd, the antiseptic and medicinal mixed with the muggy atmosphere of an antique store. There was a tinge of something else now, something metal and acidic. And then Richie spotted the sick basin beside the bed.

“Gross,” he said with a chuckle, picking up the bucket and making like he was going to toss it at Eddie's head. “Too lazy to get to the bathroom so you gotta blow chunks here?”

Even that needling didn't work, Eddie just turned around in bed to look up at him properly.

“Didn't make it in time,” he mumbled. “'s easier this way.”

“You look like shit!”

The laugh that followed that statement was tinged with a note of panic, because Eddie really did look terrible. His eyes were red and nearly swollen shut, the skin around his mouth and nose was raw-looking and aside from a crop of broken blood vessels on his cheeks he was very, very pale. It was uncomfortably close to that version of Eddie *the thing we don't talk about* showed him, so much so it was raising a weird squirmy feeling in Richie's stomach.

“I'm sick,” Eddie stated the blatantly obvious, and followed with a fit of coughing that sounded like he was trying to bring up his traitorous internal organs.

“No shit,” Richie said, burying his worry under a thick layer of feckless bluster. “You weren't this bad when I came to visit last week. What happened?”

Eddie shrugged, feebly.

“Mom says we're going to a specialist in Colorado,” he said. “She's trying to get an appointment. I might need surgery.”

He sounded pretty fed up. They were used to Eddie being 'sick'; the wheezing and the pills and endless panic about picking up some infection that never manifested. This was the first time since breaking his arm (*or since the thing we don't talk about, ever, or it might come back*) that Richie was genuinely worried about him.

It was an awful feeling. He hated feeling that way.

“What time is that movie on?” Eddie asked him, probably wanting to change the subject just as much as Richie did.

“In, like,” Richie said, checking his watch. “Oh shit, it's already started!”

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The movie was really pretty lousy, but the fact that it had subtitles and Richie figured Eddie wouldn't be able to read them with his eyes being so sore gave him a good excuse to use his barely-practiced Japanese accent. It sounded suspiciously like his Mexican accent, but Eddie only puked once and Richie figured it wasn't because his voices were lame (although Eddie claimed it was.)

Concentrating on the accent also gave him a good excuse to ignore the sick basin...

...is that blood? Is he puking goddamn blood?...

...in favour of drawing out the gory death scene dialogue long after the samurai onscreen had stopped moving.

“You got any snacks?” he asked as the movie cut to commercial. “I thought sick people get the best snacks.”

“They're all downstairs,” Eddie told him, taking an almost-lazy drag on his aspirator.

“I'll go get them,” he offered when Eddie made no move to get out of bed. “Is your Mom home?”

“Yeah but she'll be watching Arsenio now. You've got about ten minutes before she gives me my night meds.”

Avoiding Mrs Kaspbrak was pretty easy actually, and something Richie had a lot of practice in. She kept most of the house (except Eddie's room, which was practically sterile) cluttered almost ceiling high with knick-knacks and old furniture, and lots of it was big enough to suddenly duck behind when needed. When they were little kids it was the best place for hide and seek. These days it was great

for pilfering snacks.

Richie was just raiding the pantry for potato chips when he heard Mrs Kaspbrak's familiar heavy shuffle coming his way, so he ducked in behind a row of coats hanging by the pantry wall. She walked right past him to grab a box of chocolate milk powder. He stifled a laugh as she prepared the drink on a tray; hiding medicine in ice cream or chocolate milk was for *really* little kids. And Eddie had been knocking back handfuls of pills dry for years; how bad was the stuff she was giving him now?

The laugh died in his throat as he watched her take out a huge bottle of industrial bleach, uncap it and pour a good capful into the milk mixture. She stirred it with a spoon, sniffed it, then added more chocolate. All with a peaceful, happy expression on her face.

Once, back in elementary school, Richie had tripped over the janitor's bucket while fooling around in the hall, and he remembered how his skin on his arm had stung where the cleaning solution had made contact. It burned for nearly a week. Trying to imagine that stuff going *down his throat* was unbearable.

He didn't quite know how he managed to get back upstairs without Mrs Kaspbrak seeing him, but he did. Eddie looked up at him...

...oh jesus christ she's poisoning him...

...quizzically. He was holding the sick basin again.

“Where's the snacks?” he coughed out.

“Couldn't find any,” Richie blurted out, high and bordering on hysterical.

Mrs Kaspbrak's heavy tread on the stairs alerted him, and he dove into Eddie's closet, concealing himself just as she pushed her way into the room with the tray.

“Oh Eddie,” she clucked. “TV at this hour? Didn't you say you had a headache?”

“I can't sleep,” Eddie mumbled. “I'm not going to school tomorrow anyway...”

“Well, all right, just for tonight then,” she said, shaking her head and handing him a cup of pills and a glass of water. “You can catch up on your sleep tomorrow.”

Eddie downed the pills in one mouthful, which brought on a coughing fit that had him clutching the basin. Mrs Kaspbrak cooed as she rubbed his back....

*...you did this you bitch, you crazy fucking bitch, you're **killing** him....*

...and when he was breathing normally again, she held out the chocolate milk.

“No thanks,” he told her.

“Eddie,” she said, a note of warning creeping into her voice. “We talked about this. You need the protein, and if you can't keep anything else down...”

“It tastes funny,” he argued. “You said I could just take the supplements. Everything else tastes bad.”

“Dr Harrison said you need dairy with the supplements, and until we get that appointment at St Josepha's you need to...”

“Okay, okay,” Eddie broke her off, rubbing his forehead. He took the chocolate milk from her and...

....don't do it don't do it it's poison don't do it...

...took a long swig of it. He swallowed, with some difficulty, and made a face that was halfway between pain and annoyance.

“Happy?” he asked her.

“I'm not happy with this attitude, young man,” Mrs Kaspbrak sighed. “Make sure you finish that. No excuses.”

And then she was gone, and Eddie was sitting up in bed still holding the glass. Richie crossed the room in three steps, grabbed the glass, threw open the window and hurled it as far away as he could manage.

(It landed in a neighbour's yard, breaking on the garden shed and scaring their cat.)

“What the hell...?” Eddie managed to blurt out before another coughing fit took him.

Richie's mind ticked over a hundred miles a second. He needed to call the police. He needed to call the hospital. He needed to call those people you call when kids are in trouble and need to be taken away.

*(But did he? This was Derry, and it was Richie's word against an adult's. The hospital had dealt with Mrs Kaspbrak so much they'd probably be on her side. And if he called those people who take kids away, they'd definitely take Eddie away, far away, and losing Bev had been bad enough and losing Eddie would make things even **worse...**)*

He needed to tell Eddie, at the very least.

But when Eddie looked up at him again, his eyes streaming and struggling to breathe, he knew he couldn't. Not now, anyway. Not when he had nowhere else to go.

“Don't drink that shit,” he said, with an intensity that confused Eddie even more.

“What? Why? It's just....”

“Don't do it. Anything your mom gives you from now on, get rid of it. It's making you worse.”

“How do you know?” Eddie wheezed, fumbling on his bedside locker for his aspirator. “No-one knows what's wrong with me.”

“You weren't this bad a week ago. Find a way to get rid of it, flush it down the toilet, dump it out the window, I dunno, but I promise you'll start getting better,” Richie told him.

“She watches me drink it,” Eddie countered. “She won't leave me alone until I do.”

“Then we'll figure out a way to trick her. I dunno, spill it down your shirt or something, or use one of those tube things the magicians use,” he argued. “Just promise me you won't eat or drink anything she gives you.”

Eddie stared hard at Richie, and for one awful moment Richie thought he was going to refuse, or ask more questions, or tell him to get lost. He felt the sharp prickle of tears behind his eyes, pure frustration.

Why couldn't I be Bill? Bill would know how to handle this.

But Bill wouldn't have barged his way into Eddie's house at night, raided the pantry for snacks and seen what Mrs Kaspbrak was up to in the first place.

"Okay," Eddie agreed, hesitantly.

Richie was so relieved he nearly started sobbing right there and then. Instead he covered it by flopping down on Eddie's bed hard enough to send the bed-springs screaming, threw an arm around him and turned the TV back on.

"What am I going to do for food, though?" Eddie wondered out loud, just as the movie was about to end and both of them were half-asleep.

"We'll raid Ben's place," Richie said, yawning.

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Eddie was back in school within a month, as though nothing had happened.

As time went on and they drifted apart, one by one, and forgot each

other and the minutiae of their lives ticked on and on, Richie would always wonder why seeing a box of chocolate milk in the supermarket gave him a tiny trickle of dread.